

CLAIMS

1. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method comprising:

5 establishing a network of computerized item dispensers, each dispenser containing inventory;

establishing a computer data center, the data center being in electronic communication with the network;

establishing allocation codes within the data center, the allocation codes limiting the extent to which inventory is allowed to be withdrawn from the dispensers;

10 identifying a user at one of the dispensers; and

allowing the user to reconfigure the allocation codes from the one of the dispensers.

2. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

15 prompting a user to enter a login allocation code.

3. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

displaying a user-specific default value for an allocation code.

20 4. The method of claim 1, further comprising:

prompting a user to enter a product allocation code.

5. The method of claim 4, further comprising:

prompting the user to remove a quantity of items; and

25 prompting the user to enter a quantity of the removed items.

6. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method comprising:

5           determining a user;

          receiving a request for an item from the user;

          determining an item inventory based on the request;

          determining whether a special order is necessary based on the item inventory; and

          directing the user to a customer-pre-determined merchant for the special order.

10 7. The method of claim 6, wherein the customer-pre-determined merchant is a web-based merchant.

8. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method comprising:

15           determining a user accessibility;

          receiving at an item dispenser a request from the user for an item;

          determining whether the item is present at the point-of-use item dispenser;

          searching whether the item is present at a secondary item dispensers when the item is not present at the point-of-use item dispenser; and

20           displaying the secondary item dispenser when the item is present at the secondary item dispenser.

9. The method of claim 8, further comprising:

          prompting a user to select an item from a scrolling list if more than one item is

25           present at the secondary item dispenser.

10. The method of claim 9, further comprising:  
flashing the secondary item dispenser when the item is selected.

5 11. The method of claim 8, further comprising:  
prompting a user to special order when the item is not present at any secondary  
item dispenser.

12. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method  
10 comprising:  
determining a user accessibility;  
determining whether an item is to be checked in or out by the user;  
assigning a loan period when the item is checked out by the user;  
configuring a first customer-pre-defined time period when the checked-out item is  
15 delinquent; and  
assigning the checked-out item a consider-consumed status when the checked-out  
item is not returned after a second customer-pre-defined time period.

13. The method of claim 12, further comprising:  
20 charging the consider-consumed item to the user.

14. The method of claim 12, further comprising:  
notifying the user of the loan period when the user logs in.

25 15. The method of claim 12, further comprising:

preparing reminders and reports on a delinquent user.

16. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method comprising:

5 determining a user accessibility;

determining a defective return location based on the user accessibility at the point-of-use; and

returning a defective item to the defective return location.

10 17. The method of claim 16, further comprising:

designating a quantity of the defective item.

18. The method of claim 16, further comprising:

allowing an authorized user to unload the defective items.

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19. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method comprising:

determining a user accessibility;

designating an item as a market research item;

20 determining whether the market research item is removed by the user;

generating a market research response; and

communicating the market research response to the user.

20. The method of claim 19, wherein the market research response is a survey.

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21. The method of claim 19, wherein the market research response includes displaying a video advertisement.

22. The method of claim 19, wherein the market research response is a receipt.

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23. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method comprising:

determining a user accessibility;

determining a user-specific work type based on the user accessibility; and

10 assigning a consumption quota based on the user-specific work type.

24. The method of claim 23, wherein the consumption quota defines a quantity of items to be checked out.

15 25. The method of claim 23, wherein the consumption quota defines a customer-defined check out period.

26. A method of tracking an item dispenser inventory at a point-of-use, the method comprising:

20 determining a user accessibility;

determining a user-defined consignment session based on the user accessibility;

and

marking a consignment inventory when there is a transaction during the consignment session.

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27. The method of claim 26, further comprising:  
reporting the consignment inventory.